The 'success' of looked after children in Higher Education in England: near peer coaching, 'small steps' and future thinking

Article (Accepted Version)

The 'success' of Looked after Children in Higher Education in England: near peer coaching, 'small steps' and future thinking.

[a]Dr Louise Gazeley[1] and [a]Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith

[a]School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Brighton, England.

[1] **CONTACT. Louise Gazeley. Email:** lhg20@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper addresses the shortage of studies on the 'success' of care-experienced young people in Higher Education (HE) internationally. It draws on the findings of a study of a near-peer, pre-entry coaching intervention developed in England to address stakeholders' concerns around a lack of 'success' post entry to university, linked to gaps in knowledge and the challenge of providing on-going support. In delivering reciprocal benefits to the coaches, some of whom were care-experienced themselves, the *HE Champions* model promoted the possibility of longer term 'success'. The personalised nature of the young people's programme experiences and difficulties in recruitment highlighted the need for 'success' to be conceptualised as 'small steps' despite pressure to deliver more measurable outcomes. The research also highlighted the importance of reflexive, human-scale systems that put care and relationships at the centre.

Key words

First year experience; peer learning; retention; student diversity; university.

Introduction

This paper draws on the findings from a study of a near-peer, pre-entry coaching programme to address the dearth of studies on the 'success' of care-experienced young people in Higher Education (HE) internationally (Mendes et al, 2014; Salazar, 2016; Cotton at al., 2017). In England they are referred to as Looked After Children (LAC) and legally defined as those under the age of 18 for whom the Local Authority (LA) provides accommodation or who are subject to a care or placement order (DfE, 2017 p.4). In England, increasing numbers have been entering the care system late, including from refugee/asylum seeking backgrounds (DfE, 2016) for whom different rules around HE access apply. Care leavers continue to be eligible for support from LA Personal Advisers up until the age of 21 and there is interest in replicating such provision in other country contexts such as Australia (Purtell and Mendes 2016). Nevertheless LAC interested in progressing to HE continue to face multiple barriers and the minority who overcome these challenges have been identified as more than usually resilient (Cotton et al. 2017). These include: a lack of adult support and the difficult circumstances that bring young people into the care system in the first place (Geenen et al, 2014; Mendes et al. 2014; Salazar, 2016; DfE, 2016); difficulties at earlier stages in the education system (Sebba et al., 2015) and deficits in the care afforded by the state (DfE. 2016). While Briggs et al. (2012, p.14) suggest that 'aspiration to be a university student, preferably starting early in life' eases the transition to university LAC may instead be negotiating family instability and placement insecurity. Although the research aimed to identify the strengths and limitations of the programme it highlighted the need for reflexive, human-scale systems that place care and relationships at the centre.

The *HE Champions Coaching Programme* grew out of a desire amongst a small group of widening participation (WP) practitioners to improve opportunities for 'success' amongst LAC. Harrison and Waller (2017, p.157) argue that there is 'an absence of a clear epistemology for assessing success' and that this is sometimes narrowly defined as being about gaining access. Other definitions are more holistic, adopting a life-cycle approach that includes retention, known to be linked closely to transition (Wilcox et al, 2005; Gale and Parker, 2014) but also the wider university experience (Read et al, 2003). Such understandings exceed the scope of neo-liberal agendas focusing on student engagement

(Barnacle and Dall'Alba, 2017). Some definitions extend to include the class of degree obtained and entry to graduate level employment, outcomes disproportionately available to the more socially advantaged (Bathmaker et al, 2013; Brown, 2013). A life-cycle approach to the 'success' of LAC in HE is more appropriate than more linear and normative conceptualisations given the propensity for 'disadvantage' to impact across the life course.

The paper begins with a fuller discussion of the challenges faced by LAC seeking to enter HE and the potential value of both human-scale approaches that put people at the centre of systems (Fielding 2007; 2012) and near peer coaching as a strengths-based approach to intervention (Moran and Brady, 2010). Following a discussion of the research design, the synergies between LA stakeholders' motivating concerns and the forms of learning facilitated by the programme are explored. A discussion of the reciprocal benefits of a model that deployed care-experienced coaches in ways that promoted positive future thinking then follows. A final section addresses the individualised, 'small-steps' nature of the benefits of involvement and the lack of fit with pressures to evidence 'success' in more uniform and concrete ways.

Background

Harrison and Waller (2017, p.149) argue that for those working to widen participation to university the challenge is to support those who have the potential to progress but who would not otherwise do so. Although LAC are among the most likely to fall within this category, in England they occupy a somewhat 'bespoke' place in this agenda, being considered outside mainstream definitions and discussions of 'disadvantage' (see for example UCAS 2016 and DfE 2017a). While the UK is considered to have developed a stronger focus on this issue than many other countries and to have more robust systems for monitoring and promoting change (Harvey et al., 2015), recent improvements in the representation of LAC in HE have stalled at 6% as compared with just over 50% of the general population (Sebba et al, 2015). Mountford-Zimdars et al., (2017) (also without specifically referencing LAC) suggest that the increased diversity of the student population and persistent differences in the outcomes experienced by different groups present an equity challenge that universities cannot meet alone.

Harrison and Waller (2017, p.143) argue that in England access to HE is strongly associated with 'the accumulation of educational disadvantage over the young person's life course'. Although LAC are not a homogenous group (Mendes et al. 2014) they tend to be drawn disproportionately from households at the 'bottom of society' (Jackson and Cameron,

2012, p.1113). By the later stages of schooling many will be underachieving, have been identified with additional learning needs or experienced periods of disciplinary exclusion (Sebba et al, 2015; DfE 2017b). National attainment data (DfE, 2017b) indicate that LAC progress less well than their peers at every stage. Important as they are, such data cannot adequately capture how educational and social disadvantages intersect and accumulate over time. For Harrison and Waller (2017, p.152) current approaches to WP evaluation are similarly 'reductive' in encouraging a focus on measureable, short term gains at the expense of understanding the complexity captured in more qualitative approaches. These accountability pressures stem from policy agendas that assume a relationship between input and output that aligns particularly poorly with the lived experiences of LAC, many of whom enter HE in later life (Mendes et al., 2014).

A recent English government report on LAC notes the huge 'difficulty of navigating their way through their late teens and early twenties without a strong and stable social network to support them' (DfE, 2016, p.18). For those with no family experience on which to draw, entering university is a 'significant social displacement' (Briggs et al. 2012, p.4). Nevertheless, universities are structured around an expectation of independence that can intensify feelings of isolation and dislocation (Read et al, 2003; Scanlon et al. 2007; Cotton et al., 2017). While, Martin and Jackson (2002, p.129) argue that the local authority as corporate parent has a responsibility to provide the same kinds of support as any other 'good' parent and that LAC in HE need 'continuing support, financial, practical and emotional,' massification has made it easier to overlook those in need of continuing care (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Consistent with the move to more decentralised systems there is also a mixed picture when it comes to the levels and forms of support available (OFFA, no date). Notwithstanding, many universities have strengthened their focus on LAC and most offer a named contact, transition support and additional funding alongside year round accommodation (Askew et al., 2016). However, remaining on campus over vacation periods can compound feelings of isolation (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Driscoll, (2013) also identifies a tendency for LAC to be reluctant to identify as care-experienced, perhaps from fear of stigma (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Mountford- Zimdars and colleagues (2017) suggest that 'success' is more likely where universities foster close working relations between academic and support staff and provide a combination of universal and targeted support, informed by holistic understandings of their student body. These more human-scale kinds of systems might encourage more radical thinking about how teaching and learning might also need to change (Davies, 2005).

Driscoll (2013, p. 141) describes LAC as leading 'intricate lives' characterised by a 'busy isolation' (p.146) that requires them to have many relationships but little opportunity to maintain and develop them. Fielding (2012 p.676) notes that 'relationships and care are at the heart of teaching and learning' and an encouraging and supportive relationship with a trusted adult is known to be associated with higher levels of educational success (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Driscoll, 2013; Cotton et al, 2015; Sebba et al., 2015). LAC are not unusual in finding the transition to HE difficult, many others arriving feeling ill-prepared and under-informed (Read et al., 2003; Wilcox et al. 2005; Scanlon et al, 2007; Gale and Parker, 2014). LAC can be additionally disadvantaged by more restricted access to networks providing insider knowledge of HE such as how student societies can develop a sense of belonging (Cotton et al. 2017). Previous research suggests that near peer-coaching models can ease this transition, and that care-experienced under-graduates are particularly well placed to provide this support (Geenan et al, 2014; Salazar et al, 2016). Moran and Brady (2010) emphasise that while coaching *can* lead to the acquisition of greater control over life through a focus on the achievement of mutually agreed goals, the very real structural constraints that some individuals face must also be recognised.

Research Design

The *HE Champions Coaching Programme* developed out of an established collaborative relationship between Aimhigher London South (a third sector widening participation organisation) and stakeholders in eight universities[2] and seven LAs.[3] Its development was motivated by a strong sense that a new approach was needed. The model comprised pre-established whole group start and end points, with regular individual coaching meetings undertaken by selected undergraduates in between. The research aimed to inform future innovation by delivering impartial insights into the needs addressed by the programme, its most useful aspects and the qualities most valued in a coach, including the importance of whether they were care-experienced themselves. The research was designed to sit alongside the programme, disrupting it as little as possible as the primary concern was not to deter young people from participating in any way.

Data collection took place in two stages over a six-month period at the start and end of the programme. It involved multiple methods and perspectives and commenced with a questionnaire completed at Stage 1 by: the young people participating in the programme; the

[2] Goldsmiths; Kingston University London; London South Bank University; SOAS; St George's University London; St Mary's University Twickenham; University of Roehampton; University of Sussex.
[3] Croydon, Hammersmith and Fulham; Kensington and Chelsea; Lewisham; Merton; Wandsworth; Westminster.

young people recruited to be their coaches; the trainers who led the programme and Key Adults based in Local Authorities with responsibility for support and/or academic progress. While the majority of questionnaires were completed at the three events held to launch the programme Key Adults for the most part did not attend these and they were later asked to complete it verbally via a telephone interview, a pattern that was repeated at Stage 2. Trainers and other adults involved in the development and delivery of the programme were also interviewed by telephone at Stage 2. The young people and their coaches also participated in separate focus groups that involved collaborative mind-mapping exercises at Stage 2 at which point the coaches also completed a second questionnaire. Additional data were gathered via observation of key events including: the initial recruitment activities; a final training/celebration event for coaches; and an end of programme celebration attended by both the young people and their coaches. The following table provides additional information about the different participant groups and a key to how data from the different sources have been presented in the following discussion.

Table providing key to data presentation.

Date source	YP	Young person in Local Authority care and thinking of progressing to HE
	KA	Key adult working with LAC in a Local Authority role
	C	Undergraduate with care experience and/or other experience of disadvantage selected and trained to work as a coach
	T	Trainer involved in the delivery and/or development of the coaching model
Method	Q	Questionnaire
	I	Interview
	WN	Written notes made by Young People and Coaches during Focus Groups
	OE	Observed Exchange at key programme event attended by researcher
Time point	S1	Stage One
	S2	Stage Two
	FCE	Final celebration event led by trainers and attended by young people and coaches to mark the end of the progamme

Ethical considerations were given careful consideration throughout. Consequently it was decided not to approach foster carers unless they were present at programme events and in the end none were involved as none attended. As not all of the young people involved in the programme elected to contribute to the research the findings also inevitably represent the experience of those young people who felt most at ease to participate. In total there were 31 participants at Stage One from across all participant groups: young people, *n*=5; coaches, *n*=8; key adults *n*=12; trainers, *n*=6. There were also 31 participants at Stage 2 though these were not necessarily all the same individuals: young people *n*=6; coaches *n*=12; key adults, *n*=8; trainers and other adults involved in programme delivery, *n*=5.

Initial analysis of the Stage 1 data was followed by subsequent re-examination of the entire data set at Stage 2 and all data were re-analysed for the purposes of this paper. Questionnaires were completed and returned anonymously making it impossible to consistently match individual participants to specific sources of data. From the data that could be matched to particular participants it emerged that experiences from coaches with care experience conveyed mobilising of shared understanding. In addition to the four who explicitly referenced their care experiences, Trainer 2 described others as '*having powerful stories'* of being affected by such things as bereavement, bullying and being moved around.

Discussion

i. Lack of 'success' in HE as motivation for the programme

This section focuses on Key Adults' concerns around a lack of success in HE as a motivation for the development of the intervention. While it is too easy to position the circumstances and support needs of young people as personal deficit, given that lack of care from academics and institutions emerges centrally in young people's accounts of difficulties negotiating HE (Lolich and Lynch, 2017), such an approach is consistent with Gale and Parker's theorisation of transition as a fluid process with implications for 'resourcing students' capabilities to navigate change' (2014 p.735). Key Adults emphasised the importance of this issue to many of those involved: 'Anyone in my field is going to see HE support as a priority and there's a limited range of programmes supporting that' (KA1 S2Q). The programme was primarily built around the idea that there were gaps in support and knowledge at the pre-entry phase and that these had consequences later on:

> What we've found with the young people in care is they're making quite ill informed decisions about universities and courses. They're accepting offers without even going to unis. One accepted a place because it looked nice in photos. (KA,S1Q)

Having made the wrong choice of programme and/or institution is identified as a factor negatively affecting transition in the first term at university (Yorke, 2000; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and when other factors such as finance and difficulties with social integration (Bowles et al. 2013) are considered LAC can be seen to be at increased risk. Despite the additional practical support that is now often available to LAC, finance and accommodation emerged as particular concerns, with vacation periods identified as difficult and requiring careful planning. One Key Adult also highlighted the changing profile of LAC in the local authority and the additional demands on young people from asylum seeking backgrounds:

> Growing up in another country you may not have this knowledge of uni and how to get the most from a university experience and confidence to do so. It's all very aspirational but it takes a lot of guts to get there. It's a big step in terms of independence. (KA,S1Q)

Previous research testifies to the significance of prior life experience to perceptions of the university environment and perceived self-efficacy (Ashwin and Trigwell 2012). Research into student preparedness for HE suggests that those leaving a family environment and expected to take responsibility for their own lives experience an 'abrupt shift' (Lowe and Cook, 2003. p.66) and it was suggested that the absence of a family network might intensify this:

> Many of ours have to repeat the first year or change courses. They are vulnerable because they don't have a safe place, a family to go back to. The other issue is accommodation. There's a whole load of things we need to sort out. (KA,S1Q)

Overall there was a strong sense that simply gaining access to HE was not enough as many went on to experience stressors in the first year that increased the risk of drop out.

Normative assumptions around the forms of involvement provided by 'good' parents have implications for how disadvantage is recognised and worked with in practice yet it could not be assumed that even those LAC still in touch with family had access to networks with knowledge of HE:

> Even family members they stay in contact with tend not to have had university pathway, so there's not that understanding or knowledge. (KA,S1Q)

There were clearly additional challenges for those in the role of corporate parent. One Key Adult emphasised the value of making joint visits once a university had been identified and the importance of establishing a connection with the designated university lead for LAC, especially where later difficulties arose. However, another discussed the difficulty of establishing and utilising these lines of communication in order to ensure continuing care: 'I

try and visit them. I try to keep involved… but it is hard' (KA,S1Q). The programme was therefore proactive and future orientated in aiming to deliver:

> Survival skills for… care leavers … without any local support systems. Soft care skills re mental and physical health. (KA,S1Q)

Key Adults conceptualised their responsibilities holistically, reflecting a life cycle approach:

> Supporting care leavers in having a full uni life. Helping care leavers think about work in the future. Help care leavers think ahead about accommodation. (KA,S1Q)

Previous research identifies a need for those in advice roles to provide education around issues likely to be experienced by those less familiar with such settings (Buissink et al. 2010) and it was noted that schools and colleges vary in the level of support provided, with other agendas often taking precedence. One Key Adult felt that university admission processes were insufficiently adapted to take account of differences in levels of support:

> Our children don't have parents and teachers preparing them for [courses where the entry criteria are difficult and an interview required] like some others. Knowing how to jump through the hoops. (KA,S1Q)

Key Adults also expressed varying levels of confidence around their own capacity to fill this knowledge gap and that of others:

> Social workers in our set up didn't feel equipped to help out much with uni applications or have time to devote to it. The initial idea was for me to fill that gap. But with my new job role now I don't have time to either. (KA,S1Q)

Although there are resources available to inform stakeholders working with LAC there is no guarantee that they will reach them, leaving some dependent on informal sources:

> The young people always ask a lot about finance for uni and I don't know the right answers. I read a newspaper article about all the bursaries young people can apply for. I wish I kept it so I could advise the young people I work with (KA,S1Q)

Key Adults felt strongly that the undergraduate students recruited to work as coaches could supply something that would better fill these gaps: 'For children in care what's missing is not teachers but that friend outside the system' (KA,S1Q). There was a strong sense that some questions would be more comfortably addressed by a near-peer and that not all relate to formal areas of knowledge:

> It's often indiscernible stuff that I can't answer or kids won't ask me… It might be a question they feel silly about, or just a general chat about their work. Myself, foster carer – it's lots of middle aged women around a teenage lad. (KA,S1Q)

Asked to comment on the qualities desirable in a coach the young people confirmed the importance of more personal relationships built on shared understandings:

> You have to be comfortable with each other to come up with more questions. (YP,FG)

> They've just come out of university or they've just gone to university, so they kind of understand what we're going to go through. (YP,FG)

Some of the concerns raised by Key Adults were considered to lie outside their control, highlighting a sense of powerlessness:

> For LACs, particularly asylum seekers… Successes can be little and far between but you have to hold on to them. It can be soul destroying - how it feels for young people who have worked so hard against obstacles (KA,S1Q)

Overall the programme emerged as a vehicle for pre-emptively addressing Key Adults' concerns around a lack of 'success' in the future, consistent with understandings of HE transition as a process rather than a fixed point in time (Gale and Parker, 2014).

ii. New knowledge as a protective factor

Given that first year students are often dependent on 'decontextualized, naïve, knowledge about' university (Scanlon et al., 2007 p.237) and that LAC are often at an additional disadvantage in this regard, this section focuses on the opportunities for learning about HE afforded by the programme. Although much of this aligned closely with the concerns that Key Adults suggested jeopardised future 'success' a key tenet of the programme was that 'the learners lead' (T2). The young people therefore identified their own coaching goals and this appeared essential as they were at different stages in their HE journeys:

> I haven't done the uni [application] thing so for me it was what to expect at uni and… talking about what I study and how I can improve on it and get the grades I want (YP,FG)

The young people expressed different motivations for joining the programme including 'experience and knowledge of what uni has in store for us' (YP,S1Q) and 'to feel more comfortable in the suitability of higher education' (YP,S1Q). The coaches needed to become attuned to each young person as an individual with different strengths and facing different barriers:

> Didn't really know at beginning how can help her… Already got place at university. Faced a lot of setbacks, people telling her she can't do the things she wants to do. (C,FCEO)

The coaches' questioning of the young people's self-identified goals was seen to be a way of bridging the 'disconnect between aspiration and reality: trying to connect these two' (C S2WN). It was described by one coach as being 'like onion peeling' and another as 'allowing

room to share without being judged' (C,S2WN). One young person explained how the process had opened up lines of communication:

> It was quite natural which kind of helps to get the problems out in the open quicker and deal with them in a more realistic way (YP,FG)

Some indicated having gained knowledge and understanding in areas that aligned closely with the concerns motivating the programme's development:

> My goal was really to see what I really wanted to do at uni… I was like 'I want to do this, this and this' and then at the end of it, I kind of know what I want to do now and what unis I want to go to. (YP,FG)

> If I didn't go for this I wouldn't have read through all the modules, I would have said, 'Yeah I want to go here and do [subject name] … so it actually made us more knowledgeable in the sense of what we need to do to know what we're doing. (YP,FG)

Coaches also highlighted the acquisition of new knowledge in key areas, including how to identify the point of contact for LAC at a university and the kinds of financial support available. Other areas of learning encompassed the social aspects of HE such as the night life and music scene. These more contextualised insights are important given the increased risk of social isolation amongst LAC (Cotton et al., 2017) and they have a part to play in building understanding of how new networks can be built:

> But societies, I had no idea, like societies had loads of stuff... I've spoken to a lot of people about the union and [they have] never come across that. (YP,FG)

Fielding (2012, p.684) highlights the importance of mutuality, contrasting the functional with the personal which he argues is 'expressive of who we are and enabling of who we wish to become'. The mixed feelings that the young people might experience during the first week at university were explored during the final celebration event. One trainer explained that *all* students feel alien at first and need to keep going, encouraging the coaches to share their own experiences of feeling this way and surviving. This mixture of open engagement with real life concerns alongside positive insights into lived 'success' appeared to provide an experience of mutuality as a protective resource for the future.

iii. ***Connecting pasts with futures***

A life-cycle approach to 'success' in HE does not automatically entail an understanding of challenging life experiences in the way that these understandings were embedded in the programme. This appeared to be structured as a reflexive space in which to make sense of the past in preparation for the future:

> In care or not it is such a good way of reflecting on where a person stands in their life and relation to themselves and others. (C,S2Q)

One Key Adult had a sense of how the personal statement, written as part of the university admissions process, might unfairly work against such a forward looking focus:

> My own daughter was able to take up opportunities that the young people we work with don't know about... People need to know not just about the young person's history in care, but about where they can go in life. (KA,S1Q)

The uncomfortable feelings that might be engendered around the need to 'sell themselves' in the personal statement were addressed by one trainer at the final celebration event who asked the young people to reflect on the question: 'What does your history - that you got to this point - what does your willingness say to the university?' The personal statement was then re-presented as a way of connecting 'all your life experiences'. The Coaches suggested that this repositioning of the past was about the empowerment of the young person and a rejection of anything deterministic: 'Your social workers do not define your life you define it!' (C,S2WN). Consequently there was a strong emphasis on utilising the experience to foster independence and deliver sustainable benefits:

> [I am] a care leaver who believes that all care [leavers] should be supported to reach their full potential. To do this I believe that we need people who care for care leavers, who care about them and who enable them to care for themselves → this programme does enable them to care for themselves that is why I did this programme (C,S2FG)

One young person described the process as starting with being challenged but ending with challenging himself. Another described having become more optimistic based on the realisation 'that if I'm really positive I can do way more than I thought I could'.

The coaches identified their similar life experiences as a motivating factor when it came to applying for the role:

> I have been in care myself and know how hard it can be (C,S1Q)

> On paper I come from a disadvantaged background, young carer, teenage pregnancy, low income … so I want to give back to other disadvantaged groups (C1,S1Q)

Participation in the programme was described by one trainer as involving a reconfiguring and sharing of narratives around their own pasts:

> It's… how they use that experience… It was set up by taking them back to their experience. It was difficult for some. (T1, S2I)

One young person indicated that this connection had been important in securing her involvement in the programme:

> They were talking about personal things that they had to go through and… I was really inspired, cos I just felt really uplifted and I felt like I wanted to participate in this (YP,FG)

Coaches highlighted the positives arising from their involvement, important given that some were care-experienced themselves: 'The benefits to both coaches and learners are equal'

(C,S2WN). In addition to developing a range of inter-personal skills relevant to their future careers some coaches highlighted more far reaching consequences:

> Not only will you enrich the life of another, you will also learn a tremendous amount about yourself. Whatever career path you choose, having a high level of emotional intelligence will help you in your path to success. (C,S2Q)

On one level the coaches seemed to both promote and mirror future success. Considered from a life-cycle approach, the reciprocal benefits experienced by coaches who had already overcome significant challenges seemed equally important.

iv. Evidencing 'success' ?

This section turns to the challenge of evidencing the 'success' of the model in a context where such pressures are part of routine practice. There was an overarching concern that more LAC could have benefited from the intervention than the 16 who ultimately took part. Those who did also experienced varying levels of involvement. Some explanations of the problems around recruitment reflected wider challenges in their lives:

> When you are a LAC you have a lot of adults in your life and you don't necessarily want to add more (KA,S1Q)

The most common explanation for difficulty involving young people related to the decision to bring them together for whole group events at the start as this posed a geographical challenge given that 'children in care are so scattered' (KA10 S2Q). Reflecting on the difficulties with recruitment one trainer questioned the initial reliance on unfamiliar people in unfamiliar settings, an approach that was subsequently changed. Two young people also suggested the need for more information:

> I wasn't sure of what was going to happen, what it was about, but I thought I would take a risk and see what it is, especially since people telling me "You should do this, do that" so I thought I would just give it a try (YP,FG)

These difficulties reinforced the perception that more reflexive, personalised approaches were needed:

> It's trying to be flexible, meeting each person's needs. Humans are individuals. That's the challenge. (KA,S1Q)

Key Adults asked to reflect on the 'success' of the programme made judgements on a similarly case by case basis, highlighting a wide range of internal and external factors as potentially relevant:

> The quality of the relationships was strong. They had shared interests in common… [there was] a stronger network of support at home. The [other YP is] in a foster relationship. It's very different. (KA,S2Q)

There was some sense of ripples out from the programme into other aspects of the young people's lives, including their immediate educational experiences although these influences were neither straightforward nor readily quantified:

> Although we weren't really sure if he was engaging fully, he did really well in his AS grades. Prior to that there had been a dip… We felt that involvement in the programme had really helped his motivation (KA,S2Q)

> The young person was going through a period of significant change…Unsurprisingly A levels didn't go that well…They've got supportive housing and are getting up and going to college. They're on a path, that's the important thing. (KA,S2Q)

These judgements on the 'success' of the programme highlight the multiplicity of factors at play in the lives of LAC and suggest a wide gulf between current understandings of 'success' 'as a standardised and measureable product' (Ball, 2016. p.1054) and what one participant described as the 'endless small steps [that] fall out of the long term goal of university (T3, S2I).

Final reflections

Although England is in some ways further ahead than other countries when it comes to improving the 'success' of LAC in HE (Mendes et al., 2014) there is still much to be done before the state can be considered to have successfully met its responsibilities to LAC as corporate parent (Martin and Jackson, 2012). Cotton et al. (2017) highlight the need to recognise the 'success' of LAC as linked to a combination of individual attributes, what happens at the pre-entry stage and what happens subsequently and this research further focuses attention on the interconnections between these different levels but also the value of taking an active life-cycle approach to 'success'. The programme provides a valuable example of how a collaboration across stakeholder groups that builds on informed understandings of a common challenge can drive the development of innovative solutions to a complex problem. However, it also exemplifies the risk that the necessity of evidencing 'success' might foster more reductive approaches, less suited to the particular needs and circumstances of individual LAC. Macro-level data continue to be important for highlighting the continuing scale of the challenges to be met (Jackson and Cameron, 2012) but they have the potential to homogenise as well as to reveal and they cannot be allowed to become an end in their own right.

Fielding (2007, p.402) argues that the fundamental aim of education should be to promote 'human flourishing' and this is particularly important in the case of LAC. The emphasis placed on the need for the young people to learn to look after themselves highlights

a continuing challenge to the state as corporate parent. Equally important is recognition of the responsibility of universities to care for their students as an integrated part of the pedagogic encounter, even though this is sometimes pushed outside of the educational agenda (Lynch, 2010). Human-scale approaches put care and relationships at the centre (Fielding, 2012) and the value of such approaches was evidenced not only in the relations between the young people and their coaches but also in the expertise of the trainers and the motivations of those working in the Local Authorities. They challenge the idea that 'success' will come solely from providing improved support for the young people to better adapt when it is systems and institutions that need to be developed more reflexively to better meet their needs

Acknowledgements

The views expressed in the paper are our own and we would like to thank *Aimhigher London South* for funding the research and all the other stakeholders and research participants for their support.

References

Ashwin, P., & Trigwell, K. (2012). Evoked prior experiences in first-year university student learning, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(4), 449-463. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2011.634384

Askew, J. Rodgers, P., & West, A. (2016), Who Cares for Care Leavers. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 175., 49-56. doi:10.1002/he.20198

Ball, S.J. (2016). Neoliberal education? Confronting the slouching beast. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(8), 1046-1059. doi:1177/1478210316664259

Barnacle, R., & Dall'Alba, G. (2017). Committed to learn: student engagement and care in higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development*. 36(7), 1326-1338. doi:10.1080/07294360.2017.1326879

Bathmaker, A., N. Ingram., & Waller, R. (2013). "Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: recognising and playing the game." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34 (5-6), 723-743. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.816041.

Bowles, A., Fisher, R., McPhail, R., Rosenstreich, D., & Dobson, A. (2014). Staying the distance: students' perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(2), 212-225. doi:10.1080/07294360.2013.832157

Briggs, A.R.J. Clark J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18 (1) 3-21, doi: 10.1080/13538322.2011.614468

Brown, P. (2013). "Education, opportunity and the prospects for social mobility." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34 (5-6), 678-700. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.816036

Buissink-Smith, N., Spronken-Smith, R., & Walker, R. (2010). You're doing what? Students' experiences of advice from a New Zealand university. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 29(4) , 357-371. doi:10.1080/07294361003601891

Cotton, D. Nash, T., & Kneale, P. (2017). Supporting the retention of non-traditional students in Higher Education using a resilience framework. *European Educational Research Journal,* 16 (1), 62-79. doi:10.1177/1474904116652629

Davies, M. (2005). Less is More: the move to person-centred, human-scale education. *FORUM*, 47 (2-3), 97-118.

DfE. (2016). *Keep on Caring. Supporting Young People from Care to Independence*. HM Government.

DfE. Statistical First Release (2017a). *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England, 2014/15 age cohort. SFR 39/2017, 03 August 2017* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/635103/SFR39-2017-MainText.pdf Accessed August 2017.

DfE. (2017b). *Statistical First Release Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2016 SFR 12/2017, 23 March 2017.* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602087/SFR12_2017_Text.pdf. Accessed August 2017.

Driscoll, J. (2013). Supporting Care Leavers to Fulfil their Educational Aspirations: Resilience, Relationships and Resistance to Help. *Children & Society*, 27, 139-149. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00388.x

Fielding, M. (2007). The human cost and intellectual poverty of high performance schooling: radical philosophy, John Macmurray and the remaking of person-centred education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(4), 383-409. doi:10.1080/02680930701390511

Fielding, M. (2012). Education as if people matter: John Macmurray, community and the struggle for democracy. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 675-692. doi:10.1080/03054985.2012.745044

Gale, G., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education,* 39(5), 734-753. doi:10.1080/03075079.2012.721351

Geenen, S. Powers, L., & Phillips, L. (2015). Better Futures: a Randomized Field Test of a Model for Supporting Young People in Care with Mental Health Challenges to Participate in Higher Education. *The Journal of Behavioural Health Services and Research*, 42(2), 150-171. doi:10.1007/s11414-014-9451-6

Harrison, N., & R. Waller. (2017). Success and Impact in Widening Participation Policy: What Works and How Do We Know? *Higher Education Policy,* 30, 141-160. doi:10.1057/s41307-016-0020-x

Harvey, A. Andrewartha, L., & P. Mcnamara, P. (2015). A forgotten cohort? Including people from out-of-home care in Australian higher education policy. *Australian Journal of Education,* 59(2), 182-195. doi:10.1177/000-4944115587529

Jackson, S., & Cameron, C. (2012). Leaving care: Looking ahead and aiming higher. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1107-1114. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.041

Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). It's a struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615. doi:10.1080/0268093021000145863

Lolich, L., & Lynch, K. (2017). Aligning the market and affective self: care and student resistance to entrepreneurial subjectivities. *Gender and Education*, 29 (1), 115–131. doi:10.1787/eag-2013-en

Lowe, H., & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the Gap: are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1), 53-76. doi:10.1080/03098770305629

Lynch, K. (2010). Carelessness: A Hidden Doxa of Higher Education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 9, 54–67. doi:10.1177/1474022209350104

Martin, P., & S. Jackson, S. (2002). Educational success for children in public care: advice from a group of high achievers. *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 121-130. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2206.2002.00240.x

Mendes, P. Michell, D., & Wilson, J. (2014). Young people transitioning from Out-of-home Care and Access to Higher Education: A Critical review of the Literature. *Children Australia*, 39(4), 243-252. doi:10.1017/cha2014.25

Moran, M., & Brady, B. (2010). Improving Self-Efficacy?: Reflections on the Use of Life Coaching Techniques among Family Support Service Users. *Practice*, 22(5), 269-280. doi: 10. 1080/09503153.2010.514045

Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sanders, J. Moore, J. Sabri, D. Jones, S., & Higham, L. (2017). What can universities do to support all their students to progress successfully throughout their time at university? *Perspectives: Policy and practice in Higher Education*, 21 (2-3), 101-110. doi:10.1080/13603108.2016.1203368.

OFFA *Topic briefing: Care leavers*
https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-care-leavers/ Accessed August 2017.

Purtell, J., & (2016). Stand By Me – Flexible and Holistic Support for Young Care Leavers: Smoothing Transitions from Care. *Children Australia*. Special Issue: Caring for children outside the home – from institutions to nations. 41(3), 208-213. doi:10.1017/cha.2016.18

Read, B. Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of 'Belonging' and 'Isolation' at a Post -1992 University. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28 (3), 261-277. doi:10.1080/03075070309290.

Rogers, R. (2011). 'I remember thinking, why isn't there someone to help me? Why isn't there someone who can make sense of what I'm going through?' 'Instant adulthood' and the transition of young people out of state care. *Journal of Sociology*, 47 (4), 411-426. doi:10. 1177/1440783311420793.

Salazar, A. Roe, S. Ullrich, J., & Haggerty. K. (2016). Professional and youth perspectives on higher education-focused interventions for youth transitioning from foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 64, 23-34.

Scanlon, L. Rowling, L. & Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have to have an identity… you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a Student Identity in the First-year Transition to University. *Journal of Youth Studies,* 10(2), 223-241. doi:10.1080/13676260600983684

Sebba, J. Berridge, D. Luke, N. Fletcher, J. Bell, K. Strand, S. Thomas, S. Sinclair, I., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data.* Rees Centre/University of Bristol.

UCAS. (2016). *End of Cycle Report 2016. UCAS Analysis and Research December 2016.* UCAS

Wilcox, P. Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gaud, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707-722. doi: doi:10.1080/03075070500340036

Yorke, M. (2000). Smoothing the transition into higher education: What can be learned from student non-completion. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9(1), 78–88.

Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2008). *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK: final report.* York, UK: The Higher Education Academy.